



# COMPETENCY

**Competency—what students know  
and are able to do—should be the  
building block of higher education.**

# Competency



*Learning has always been the foundation of higher education, but Hoosiers need more options to show what they know and progress as they master the material.*

The traditional college degree tells society that an individual had the aptitude and perseverance required to complete a collection of credit hours and courses. Yet, what students have mastered as a result of their learning often is not particularly clear to graduates or the employers who hire them.

Competency-based approaches aim to clarify the expectations and outcomes of college credentials—while more closely aligning what employers expect with what graduates can do. Though the concept may seem simple or merely a new label for a long-standing practice, competency-based models offer new opportunities to rethink how education is designed and delivered, student learning is demonstrated and degrees are granted.

Reflecting Indiana's commitment to a student-centered, mission-driven and workforce-aligned system of higher education, the state must:

1. **Define learning outcomes** (or competencies) for college programs in clear, consistent terms that are transparent to students and aligned with employer expectations and continued education.
2. **Measure student learning** consistently, continuously and transparently with a multi-faceted approach that includes ongoing assessment and portfolios of student work.
3. **Encourage innovative competency-based approaches** that free colleges and students from the restrictions of credit hours and traditional academic calendars.

## WHY IT MATTERS

### A Student Perspective

Purdue University professors have found a way to prepare students for ever-changing workforce demands. Students in the transdisciplinary program not only earn a degree and credits for coursework completed, they are guided by faculty mentors to become proficient in eight broad competencies, such as Effective Communication and Teamwork—skills that are desired by employers, but not always mastered in a traditional degree program.

Faculty mentors meet with students to develop individualized plans of study and then track student progress in each competency—rating them either developing, emerging or proficient. Students must show mastery of each competency

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to advance, either through experiences gained in the classroom or in extracurricular activities.

Upon completing their undergraduate programs, graduates will have an online portfolio containing their college transcript and a list of badges they earned for completing activities in each competency. AJ Hocker, a Purdue sophomore taking classes in Aeronautical Engineering Technology, Unmanned Aerial Systems and Psychology thinks his portfolio will help him stand out.

“I want potential employers to see everything I can do, not just what’s on my résumé,” said AJ. “What you do in life is who you are, and I want to show employers that I’m well rounded and prepared for the challenges of the workforce.”

# Credit Hours Were Not Designed to Measure Student Learning

Hoosiers might be surprised to discover that the credit-hour system upon which higher education has operated for generations was not created to measure student learning. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Carnegie Unit—created by industrialist Andrew Carnegie in collaboration with Cornell University—was designed as a standard measure of college professors' full-time status required to receive a pension. The "credit-hour" of today is derived directly from the Carnegie Unit.

Over time, the credit hour became the proxy for student learning and the standardizing infrastructure of America's entire higher education system, making it possible to track and organize student and faculty work across a wide array of colleges and programs.

Some argue the credit-hour system fails to provide adequate transparency about the knowledge and skills students acquire in college. These criticisms are not without merit. Whether a student completes a course having mastered some of the material or all the material, the credits awarded

are the same. Whether a student graduates at the top or bottom of the class, the credential awarded is the same.

The credit-hour system may have its limitations, but it also provides great administrative efficiency and consistency across higher education that would be time consuming, burdensome and unrealistic to eliminate outright. For that reason, Indiana will focus its efforts on:

1. Providing clearer definitions, more explicit evidence of student learning and greater flexibility for students and colleges.
2. Moving state-level policies and institutional practices beyond the credit hour to support a more flexible and student-friendly higher education system.
3. Better measuring student learning outcomes in existing credit-hour-based programs while embracing the emergence of new competency-based programs.



**The credit hour was created as a measure of college professors' full-time status to receive a pension... rather than as a measure of student learning.**

# A Movement Toward Competency-Based Education

Colleges across the country are building innovative programs that look beyond the limitations of the credit hour—enabling students to progress as skills are mastered and ensuring that each skill is mastered before awarding a degree. These approaches have opened the door to new possibilities for safeguarding academic quality while helping students graduate faster and at a lower cost. The U.S. Department of Education’s 2013 decision that federal financial aid could be awarded to students based on the mastery of competencies as well as credit hours was the latest acknowledgment of this new period of innovation.

So, what’s the difference between credit- and competency-based programs? Here are some common distinctions:

| <b>SIMILARITIES</b>              | <b>Historical Approach</b>  | <b>Modern Credit-Hour Approach</b>  | <b>Modern Competency Approach</b>   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Focus on Learning</b>         | Learning has always been the foundation of higher education   |   |   |
| <b>Assessment of Learning</b>    | Faculty have always used assessments to validate learning   |   |   |
| <b>DIFFERENCES</b>               | <b>Historical Approach</b>  | <b>Modern Credit-Hour Approach</b>  | <b>Modern Competency Approach</b>   |
| <b>How Learning is Described</b> | Learning outcomes included in syllabi for some courses  | Learning outcomes developed at the course level for all courses and, increasingly, at the program level     | Learning outcomes developed at the program level with delivery and sequencing designed around them  |
| <b>How Learning is Assessed</b>  | More reliance on pencil-and-paper exams and assignments   | Best practice: supplement traditional exams with portfolios, project-based work and alternative assessments | Consistent use of multi-faceted assessment techniques for each competency   |
| <b>How Content is Delivered</b>  | More reliance on in-person lecturing  | Best practice: multiple and varying delivery methods, increased use of technology                           | Consistent use of multiple and varying delivery methods, increased use of technology  |
| <b>When Students Progress</b>    | When semesters conclude, if they mastered the majority of learning outcomes                               | When semesters conclude, if they mastered the majority of learning outcomes                                 | When they master learning outcomes; must master 100 percent to graduate   |
| <b>What Grades Represent</b>     | Combination of portion of learning outcomes mastered and level of mastery, achieved in set period of time | Combination of portion of learning outcomes mastered and level of mastery, achieved in set period of time   | If used, level of mastery the student achieved across the full range of learning outcomes, achieved within whatever timeframe the student took to master them |
| <b>What Faculty Do</b>           | Design curriculum and deliver course content  | Handle increasingly more responsibility from course content and delivery to student advising                | Faculty and staff more likely to specialize: subject matter expert, coach, assessor or curriculum designer  |

Source: Informed by HCM Strategists, 2015.

# Defining Learning Outcomes

*As more Hoosiers pursue education beyond high school, a focus on clear competencies ensures that college credentials represent the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in their careers and in life.*

Competency must become a common currency that is universally understood by students, utilized by colleges and recognized by employers. This requires greater clarity and consistency as to how student learning outcomes are defined and conveyed, both the core competencies all Hoosier graduates need for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as those competencies that are distinct among programs and disciplines.

Traditional programs have long established learning outcomes, built at the course level then aggregated by program. An emerging practice reverses this process, first establishing program-level competencies and then building academic delivery around them. Regardless of the approach,

the benefits of Indiana colleges describing competencies consistently in terms that are easily understood by students and employers are clear.

Indiana created a strong foundation on which to build when college faculty established a statewide transfer core curriculum composed of competencies every transfer student should master within 30 credit hours. This list can serve more than just transfer students. It can become the foundation for a set of skills and abilities that all Hoosier graduates should possess. By focusing intently on the goal that all graduates acquire this core set of competencies, Indiana can clearly convey—or better yet, improve—the value of its college degrees and credentials in terms of student learning.

**To provide a common ground for institutions planning to create or expand competency-based options, the Commission will champion the following strategies:**

1. Build on foundation of statewide transfer general education core with a set of core competencies—marketable skills that all college graduates should master.
2. Develop a clear set of competencies for all courses in the state's Core Transfer Library.
3. Expand opportunities for college faculty to collaborate with employers in workplace settings to better align curriculum and instruction.
4. Engage representatives from business and industry to ensure competencies reflect employer needs and are described in terms that resonate with employers.
5. Challenge Indiana colleges to develop degree programs that are designed around competencies rather than credit hours or courses.
6. Develop a statewide strategy to ensure that students in competency-based programs can transfer seamlessly without the need to back-map completed competencies to courses and credits.
7. Boost creation of competency-based education programs by compiling resources from national thought leaders and creating a statewide network for sharing competency best practices and collaborative problem-solving.

# Measuring Student Learning

*Competency-based learning enables students to progress in their programs by demonstrating what they have learned at the pace they learn it.*

Letter grades have long served as a proxy for student learning, but it is not clear if a “C” means that a student mastered some competencies perfectly and others not at all or mastered each with average quality. Thought leaders in Indiana and across the country are tackling this challenge with important multi-state efforts, including the Degree Qualifications Profile, VALUE rubrics, and the Interstate Passport Initiative that are clarifying the competencies associated with different degree levels, creating consistent standards for assessing student learning outcomes and facilitating college transfer across states based on competencies.

In this era of new delivery models and accelerated degree options, clear measures of student learning are more important than ever in ensuring that innovation does not come at the expense of quality. College faculty overwhelmingly agree that the assessment of competency should take many forms. Meaningful measures of student learning

often use project-based assessments or portfolios of student work in addition to traditional assessments to provide a more comprehensive view of a student’s learning and abilities.

Such an approach to assessment could strengthen Indiana’s commitment to core competencies if faculty collaborate to determine the best way to assess the core and do so consistently for all students. This holds promise for students and employers as well, providing a ready, data-backed answer to the question: Will I learn marketable skills from my degree?

Measuring student learning using the building blocks of competencies must be coupled with recording progress based on them as well. A competency-based transcript and a super-charged résumé may well become one and the same, helping students articulate their learning to employers in ways never before possible.

**The Commission will champion a statewide commitment to clear measures of student learning, including:**

1. Encourage college faculty to develop consistent mechanisms for evaluating program quality in alignment with recent nationally-recognized approaches.
2. Develop a faculty-driven assessment strategy for Indiana’s core set of competencies using a multi-faceted approach, including portable e-portfolios and related evidence of student work product.
3. Adopt a statewide approach to prior learning assessments, both in terms of student awareness and support that ensures course credit and progress to completion.
4. Explore the application of competency-based models for delivering early college credit in high school.
5. Record completed competencies on high school and college transcripts as well as in state data collections.
6. Integrate and publicly report quantitative and qualitative measures of student learning as part of the Indiana College Value Index.
7. Encourage all Indiana colleges to participate in state-coordinated surveys of alumni that inform the Indiana College Value Index.

# Encouraging Competency-Based Approaches

*Indiana should support the development of innovative, competency-based programs that are freed from the traditional limitations of credit hours and academic calendars.*

Indiana's coordinated system of higher education includes performance funding incentives for colleges and financial aid incentives for students. Each of these policies was designed to drive improvement in college completion, but both were built to fit the traditional credit-hour infrastructure.

Indiana must ensure that no state-level policy or practice is a barrier to the development of competency-based degrees that provide greater flexibility and learning opportunities for students. State performance funding metrics should reward the outcomes that competency-based education seeks to produce: enhanced academic quality, accelerated completion and stronger labor market outcomes.

Students and schools also need assurance that competency-based degrees are not incompatible with state financial aid policies and credit completion incentives.

Designing and implementing competency-based programs require colleges to invest significant time and already-stretched financial resources. The State should acknowledge these efforts and investments, and to the greatest extent possible, secure funding support to assist colleges with the start-up costs associated with developing competency-based programs. Whatever investment is made in these efforts will pay dividends for Hoosiers in terms of more efficient paths to student completion and greater quality assurance for employers.

**The Commission will champion state policies and local practices that support competency-based education, including:**

1. Consider college performance funding metrics that reward competency, including labor market outcomes, accelerated degree completion and academic quality.
2. Evaluate student progress for state financial aid as a percentage of program completed, not a specific number of credit hours.
3. Allow state financial aid dollars to pay fees associated with prior learning assessments to make the most efficient use of student time and taxpayer dollars.
4. Seek federal, state and philanthropic dollars to support the development and scaling of competency-based education programs.
5. Acknowledge innovation in development of competency-based education programs through annual recognition awards.
6. Report the progress of competency-based programs in Indiana College Completion Reports and Indiana College Value Index.



## You Can. Go Back.

Indiana's focus on competency aligns with a critical state goal: helping the 750,000+ Hoosier adults with some college but no degree come back and finish what they started.

With \$1,000 state grants available for returning adults, Indiana's *You Can. Go Back.* campaign is reaching out to Hoosiers directly and matching them with college options that fit their needs and career aspirations. Many Indiana colleges are offering special programs and incentives—including flexible class schedules and online courses, college credit for work and military experience, grade- and debt-forgiveness programs—as well as scholarships and tuition discounts to support Hoosier adults in their journey back to college.

While not exclusively beneficial to adults, the flexibility and self-paced learning opportunities provided by competency-based programs have proved particularly popular with returning adults who must balance work and family obligations with their schooling. Moreover, adults with substantial work experience can shorten their time to

degree through prior learning assessments, particularly if costs are supported by state financial aid.

A focus on completion and career is also critically important for this population. More affordable options will be necessary for adults balancing the financial priorities of their family with the cost of returning to college. Predictable schedules and limited trips to campus will make it possible for adult students to have more time with their families while maintaining the job that supports them. An enhanced connection between higher education and Indiana employers will inherently benefit those who are already or are returning to the workforce.

*You Can. Go Back.* is just the first step. To fully realize the potential of this population and reach the 60 percent goal, Indiana's colleges, employers and communities must fundamentally shift their thinking about higher education to ensure it meets the needs of returning adults.

